

Where I Last Got Paid to Sing

NOVEMBER 1, 2017 [MICHELLE LATOUR](#)

Versatile Vocalist Extraordinaire, Maria Damore

by **Michelle Latour**



Maria Damore—singer, actress, and voice teacher—is a professional vocalist noted for her strong, clear voice and versatility in covering musical styles such as pop, jazz, rock, musical theatre, classical, and Greek folk music (www.mariadamore.com). Her eclectic background has landed her a variety of paid gigs—from her Greek folk music duo Stavros & Maria, to her five-piece jazz combo Maria Damore and the Jazzy Gents, to regularly performing at retirement communities, assisted living facilities, and nursing homes. This month she shares her experience of performing in a jazz opera, *The Fisherman and His Wife*.

Where did you last sing and get paid?

I was hired by the Yocum Institute for Arts Education in Berks County, Pennsylvania, to be part of their Jazz Fest for Kids production, *The Fisherman and His Wife*, a new adaptation of a Grimm story. It was developed by the Yocum Institute, with music written by jazz artist Chris Heslop and the story adaptation by Joel Gori.

This 45-minute theatre piece combines elements of jazz and opera, accompanied by a three-piece jazz combo. I played the role of the wife, whose singing starts out more in the jazz realm and then becomes more operatic as her wishes become more grandiose. This was my fifth production with this organization.

How much were you paid?

I don't feel comfortable mentioning my pay, other than to say that the production was funded by a grant.

Where and when was the gig?

In March 2017. We toured to six elementary schools in Berks County for a total of eight performances and then performed an additional five shows at the Miller Center for the Arts in Reading for inner-city elementary school students.

How long did it last?

We had one month of rehearsals and then one month of shows. We rehearsed four times a week, with an average rehearsal time of two hours.

How did you get the job?

Because I'm known in my area as an extremely versatile singer/actor, I often get calls for interesting genre-crossing projects. In *The Fisherman and His Wife*, I played the role of the wife, who transforms from a simple poor fisherman's wife to an aristocratic wife,

a king, the pope, and then back to a simple wife—all via a magical fish who grants wishes. With each new “wife,” I used a different vocal style and color, from jazz to musical theatre to opera and back to jazz.

A jazz opera is such a unique concept. How did the idea develop to do something like this?

Berks County is home to the well-known Berks Jazz Fest as well as to the Berks Opera Company, Reading Theater Project, and the Yocum Institute for Arts Education. I have worked with all of these groups. There is a great interest in cross-pollination within the arts community, and the jazz, opera, and theatre folk have converged and collaborated on numerous projects. I have been fortunate to be a part of several of these projects.

Last year, I was hired to perform in an original jazz opera, *Da Ponte*, a story about Mozart’s librettist, Lorenzo Da Ponte. I played two mistresses, two emperors, and various other characters, with a big blues number smack in the middle. In *The Bear Prince*, our first jazz opera for children, I played four different characters with different vocal qualities for each.

Did you have to prepare differently for this role than you would have for a regular gig?

I didn’t have to prepare differently, because my regular gigs most often involve singing in a variety of styles. I first think about the character I’m portraying and how that character would sound, and then I begin experimenting.

Having vocal training in both classical and contemporary commercial music has helped me to develop a flexible instrument able to cross over musical styles. Much of my work has been in musical theatre and jazz, so my more recent involvement in opera has been both an absolute joy and probably my biggest challenge in terms of preparation. One fun element with these productions is that the musicians hired to play the show are jazz musicians, so the score can sound slightly different each time.

What was your overall experience like?

Wonderful! I love performing for children, whether it’s in their school gym close up or in a large theater. Telling a story through music for a young audience is taken as seriously as if we were performing a full-fledged opera in a big house. Care is taken to be authentic in character, voice, and action and never stereotyping or dumbing down just because the audience is a group of children.

The result is that the children are fully engaged in the story. This becomes evident through their eagerness to ask questions in the talk-backs after the shows. They often ask, ‘How did you learn to sing like that?’ They are fascinated by the opera sound as well as various styles of jazz they hear throughout the show.

Would you do this or a similar gig again?

Absolutely! Live theatre and music are so important for our younger generations to experience. There is nothing like seeing and hearing their organic reactions to what is happening before them. It enriches them and perhaps will influence them in becoming lifelong patrons of the arts.

Doing children’s theatre is also much more manageable in terms of scheduling around other performances and obligations because it usually involves a small cast, daytime rehearsals, and a short rehearsal period for a 45-60 minute show.

Dr. Michelle Latour is active as a teacher, singer, writer, and adjudicator and lives in Las Vegas. She has been on the full-time faculties at several universities. She is currently a voice faculty member for the Italian-based summer program, The International Opera Performing Experience and owns a private studio, the LATOUR Voice Studios. You can visit her at www.thelatourvoicestudios.com, Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram.